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Can the United States succeed in covert missions?

By William Beecher

CPYRGHT

The Navy announced that the Glinmar Explorer, the mystery ship built at the behest of the CIA, is being put in mothballs—News Item.

I knew something extraordinary was up before leaving my Pentagon desk on Friday, Feb. 7, 1975. A call had come in from the White House on the secure scrambler phone shortly before 5, directing Secretary James Schlesinger to drop everything and hurry over to the President's office by 5:15. He was told to bring the ranking military man in the building with him. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger had been similarly summoned. CIA Director William Colby was to brief them on something hot, the cryptic message said.

When I got home, about 7:45, the mystery heightened. "You had a weird call," my wife said. "The caller seemed excited but wouldn't leave a name or number."

"Man or woman?" I asked.

"Sorry to disappoint, it was a man. He said it was something connected with your work. But that's all he would say."

A half hour later the man called back. He gave me his name and rank, that of captain in the Navy. "I briefed you once," he began. "I hope you remember me." I did not.

"It has to do with a program you would know under the initial M," he said, obviously thinking that would make it all clear.

M. M? What program did I know that began with that letter? And why the bleeping mystery? From the circumstances of the call, it had to be a spooky operation, probably involving the Navy.

As acting assistant secretary of defense for public affairs I had to be wired into a number of sensitive operations, some in the cat-and-mouse business, lest something break publicly that I wouldn't know how to respond to.

Then I recalled a very sensitive program involving the Navy and the CIA. I had a 90-minute briefing some weeks before. I recall being so impressed with the importance and secrecy of the program that I had restrained my penchant to ask reporter-like questions, even when invited to. In that instance, I didn't want to know more than what the briefing officers, an admiral and a captain, chose to volunteer.

~~One of the few things unclassified about the program was its code name—Zodiac.~~

So I asked the caller: "Are you referring to something I might know under the initial Z?" (Since the phone was not a secure line and since the Russians were known to be intercepting most telephonic communications in the Washington area, we had to talk elliptically.)

"That's it," he said. "Something has happened. Can you come to a meeting in the Pentagon tomorrow morning? We'll go into the details then."

Something had indeed happened. An elaborate cover story protecting a \$350 million effort to snatch a Soviet missile submarine from the bottom of the ocean 750 miles northwest of Hawaii was threatening to come apart.

The code name of this particular operation, under the overall umbrella of Zodiac, was Matador. The names don't mean that much; they are changed from time to time for reasons of security. To this day, reporters are writing about the submarine recovery effort under the name Jennifer, an earlier designation.

Only a few days before, President Ford had been briefed on the recovery effort which had taken place the previous summer when he was Vice President and didn't have "a need to know." He was told how the Soviet Golf-class missile-carrying submarine was being hoisted from its burial site when it broke in two, the more important part plummeting back to the bottom. The President at that meeting gave his approval for Phase II of Matador, spring sea trials to test equipment repairs and improvements preparatory to a second recovery attempt in July.

But if the cover story was stripped away, any additional try for the remaining two-thirds of the diesel-powered sub, together with its nuclear-tipped missiles, its code books, its cryptographic equipment and its communication gear, would run a serious risk of confrontation at sea with the Soviet Union, which until then did not even know the location of its missing U-boat.

What had been going on involved one of the most closely held, ambitious and technologically impressive intelligence efforts in history. Only one thing — it failed to accomplish most of its objectives when the precious submarine snapped in two. It was no wonder those relatively few people familiar with the operation were anxious to keep the mission secret, so that it might be recovered.

For the crypto gear and code books might hold the key to breaking Soviet secure communications around the world. And access to a warhead of the Russian SSN-4 missile, even though not one of the latest weapons, would eliminate a lot of guesswork and enable American nuclear physicists to better understand the state of Russian warhead technology — past, present and future.

Those were the concerns passing through the minds of about 20 officials and officers who gathered in a fifth floor, special security Pentagon meeting room that Saturday morning. They were from CIA, Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA), the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and Navy Intelligence, among others.

"Gentlemen, we have a problem," the briefing officer began. He briefly sketched some history to refresh the memories of those in the room who worried about Matador only occasionally.

In 1968 a Russian Golf-class missile submarine headed from its Vladivostok base in Soviet Asia toward its patrol station somewhere off the West Coast of the United States. Without warning, during transit, an explosion occurred, sending the vessel plunging toward the bottom, three miles below. There had been no time for a distress signal.

Presumably, because the sub failed to radio in at prearranged times to its home base, the Russians figured it had been lost. A major search was mounted, extending over large reaches of the Pacific, for three full months. To no avail. The Russians had no clear idea where the vessel had gone. They gave up

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activity by the Russians, the US Navy reviewed acoustic tapes from a system of underwater listening devices designed to warn of the movement toward our shores of enemy submarines. The sounds of underwater explosions were picked up and localized, within an area about 10 miles square.

Two deep-sea research vessels — the Mizar, a surface ship that helped recover the H-bomb lost off Palomares, Spain, and the Halibut, a nuclear-powered submarine originally designed to carry strategic cruise missiles, but reconfigured for special projects — were used to find and photograph the Soviet U-boat. The Navy was interested in discovering its type, its condition and some clue as to what had caused the accident.

The photos showed that despite evidence of internal explosions, and despite that at a depth of 16,500 feet, the vessel was well below crush depth, it somehow was intact. If only there was some way to recover it whole. If only . . .

Such musing led to discussions among CIA and Navy Intelligence officers and Pentagon research engineers. It just might be possible, the engineers said, given enough time, money and support — and secrecy to protect the venture from Russian interference at the site — that effective retrieval gear could be developed.

There were some major arguments back and forth, between and within agencies. Richard Helms, then CIA boss, was at first very unenthusiastic about the Buck Rogers scheme. Adm. Elmo Zumwalt, chief of naval operations, did not like the idea of massive diversion of funds for a long-shot gamble when they could be profitably applied to other high-payoff covert and overt Navy programs. Dr. John Foster, director of defense research and engineering, was a big enthusiast.

advocates for a program in the Pentagon, the easiest way to avoid wrangling is to sanction "paper studies." So design and feasibility studies were pursued, blueprints drawn, and a momentum developed. But the Pentagon's No. 2 executive, Deputy Defense Secretary David Packard, became so concerned about the snowballing momentum that at one point he ordered that the keel of the principal recovery vessel then in blueprint stage not be laid without his specific approval.

Nonetheless, the super-secret Forty Committee, with Kissinger as chairman, which had to pass on all significant covert operations, gave its assent and on Dec. 9, 1971, the keel of the Glomar Explorer was laid at Sun Shipbuilding and Dry Dock Co., Chester, Pa.

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The cover story was one of the most elaborate in the annals of American intelligence. In order to provide an innocent mask for the special-purpose vessels, it was decided to use the guise of recovering potentially valuable manganese nodules from the seabed, an endeavor then being seriously explored by at least three American firms and several foreign ones.

Howard Hughes, the secretive billionaire recluse, was known to be one of those interested. He was approached — through intermediaries — and accepted the mission. Although the project would have the capability of scooping up quantities of baseball-size manganese nodules, and would do so to establish its authenticity, the CIA was prepared to brief the heads of other US firms on its real purpose should they become tempted by Hughes' apparent plunge to invest heavily in similar ventures. They did not.

A complicated series of "white" contracts, not involving CIA, and "black" ones, showing direct intelligence involvement and authority,

were worked up in the Hughes empire, Lockheed Aircraft Corp., Global Marine Corp., and others involved in developing, hand-crafting and operating some very exotic special equipment.

Covert efforts extended to the point where Washington officials flying to California to visit Glomar Explorer, once built, moved to the West Coast, would land at a private Lockheed airstrip and be fitted with disguises before being sped by power launch to the ship; government specialists in the crew were provided phony names and backgrounds; other civilian crewmen, all hand-picked by CIA, were told no more than what their jobs required and if any chose to quit they were provided fat bonuses or lucrative alternative employment to assure they wouldn't leave mad and perhaps spill what they knew to any outsider.

But, despite these and other painstaking efforts, the briefer at the Pentagon that Saturday morning said the cover story was coming apart. The Los Angeles Times had, the previous evening, published a front-page story which began:

"Howard Hughes contracted with the Central Intelligence Agency to raise a sunken Russian nuclear submarine from the North Atlantic, according to reports circulating among local law-enforcement officers. The operation reportedly was carried out — or at least attempted — by the crew of a supersecret marine mining vessel owned by Hughes' Summa Corp. and designed by a Los Angeles firm.

"Confidential files on the operation are believed to have been among the documents stolen by safecrackers from Summa's Hollywood offices at 7020 Romaine last June."

The story was a mixed grill of accurate and erroneous tidbits. For example, the only submarine lost in the North Atlantic was off Spain in 1970, and since its loss the Soviets had stationed an electronic intelligence ship at the site around the clock. Thus they would have known that no American ship, and certainly not the Glomar Explorer, had come anywhere near. Also, the sub lost in the Pacific was not nuclear powered. So Russian analysts, puzzling over the Los Angeles Times story, might well have chalked it off as confused and unreliable.

But reporters for the Times and quite possibly from other publications could be expected to dig further. Therefore, the purpose of the Pentagon meeting was to discuss how much had already come out and to figure out what to do to try to maintain some semblance of secrecy so the project would not be blown out of the water.

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The CIA briefer confirmed that a burglary had been committed the previous June 5. A vault had been broken into and four footlockers of papers, together with \$68,000 in cash and some artifacts, stolen. Summa officials had informed CIA of the burglary but said no secret documents were believed among the papers taken.

But, curiously, a couple of weeks later, the CIA man continued, a New York Times part-time stringer in Los Angeles, James Phelan, contacted the public-relations firm handling the Summa account and asked a lot of questions about Glomar Explorer and specifically whether it was a spy ship. He was told no, categorically.

Shortly after that, Summa contacted the CIA with the very unsettling news that among the missing papers was a one-page memo, from one senior Summa official to another, sketching the CIA-Hughes submarine project.

The CIA immediately contacted the FBI. Only briefed FBI Director Clarence Kelley and a handful of other bureau brass for the first time on the project and enlisted their assistance in investigating the burglary, since the CIA wasn't supposed to conduct domestic probes.

The FBI agreed to help, but asked that its Los Angeles field office be briefed. Then the field office briefed the Los Angeles Police Department after getting its agreement to cooperate. LAPD was supposed to be told only the minimum — that certain classified documents might have been among papers stolen the previous month from Summa. But it appears it was told much more, for to do less would have seemed to show little trust in local authorities.

In an effort to prevent the information getting out, quite a bit of fascinating information was shared with a lot of law-enforcement officers who could not be expected to be appreciative of the genuine sensitivity of the mission.

Subsequently, a man associated with the burglars put out a feeler to see whether the government was interested in buying back classified documents. The asking price: \$1 million.

A meeting was set. The FBI sent an agent posing as a private attorney empowered to discuss money. But when he showed up, the intermediary said he knew the lawyer was with the FBI, that'd he'd been tipped by someone "downtown," and he refused to talk further.

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The briefer said Los Angeles Times reporter Jerry Cohen overheard Phelan asking a lawyer in the district attorney's office about the CIA connection with the case and about the ransom demand. Cohen and fellow reporter William Farr dug hard and wrote the piece that began the unraveling process.

are the story had his own. But the CIA became aware of the reporting effort and contacted the paper's management; it was referred to William Thomas, the editor. A hasty meeting was arranged for 4:30 that afternoon. According to the Pentagon briefer, after being apprised of the problem, Thomas said he was sorry, that he wished he'd known the sensitivity of the story, but that it was already in type and would soon be running off the presses. At about 5:30 p.m. the first edition came out. Splashed across page one was the headline: "US REPORTED AFTER RUSSIAN SUBMARINE/SUNKEN SHIP DEAL BY CIA, HUGHES TOLD." Through Thomas's efforts, the story was dropped from page one to 18 in subsequent editions.

But, too late. UPI and AP had filed their versions, quoting the Los Angeles Times. And Phelan wrote a piece for the New York Times.

Because of the national and international impact of the New York Times, Colby contacted its publisher, Arthur Ochs Sulzberger, explained the sensitivity of the story and asked him to see what he could do.

Apparently he could and did do quite a lot. For despite Phelan's head start on the original story, his account on Saturday ended up on page 30, with one of the smallest headlines used by the Times. The story began:

"LOS ANGELES, Feb. 7 — A middle-of-the-night burglary of Howard Hughes's headquarters in 1974 is under intensive investigation following a \$500,000 demand made upon the Hughes organization."

The article was written like a police story of the burglary and its aftermath. Not until the 13th paragraph was there any hint of the real news; and it was attributed to the Los Angeles Times report that "the stolen documents disclosed a 'contract' between the Central Intelligence Agency and the Hughes organization to help salvage a sunken Russian submarine."

at least, that the Colby call had borne fruit. But despite that and similar efforts over the ensuing several weeks, the story finally broke loose in rather full detail in mid-March.

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The incident raises some rather fundamental questions:

Should the costly covert mission have been authorized in the first place and, if so, what kind of cover story was justified?

How did the Washington establishment, reeling from the Watergate affair, handle the matter once the cover began to peel off?

If the mission was so all-fired vital, did Washington consider trying to complete it against likely Soviet opposition, and what were the respective roles of the military and civilian leaders in that determination?

Can an open society contest effectively in the covert demi-world of intelligence?

There's little question that successful retrieval of the sub and all it contained would have been extremely valuable. I recall a visit to a nuclear weapons laboratory at Los Alamos, N.M. when Deputy Defense Secretary William Clements — at the time the only one in the room aware of Project Mator — asked a group of top arms designers whether it would be worthwhile, if it were possible, to get hold of a vintage Soviet warhead. They explained in some detail, which must remain classified, why the ability to study such a warhead would be invaluable.

Code books, crypto gear, and the special communications aboard a missile sub might have been even more valuable.

Whether the lot was worth \$35 million, \$350 million or \$3.5 billion is anyone's guess. But if it had allowed the United States to break Russian codes, obtain deep insight into Soviet subs, that kind of information would be worth quite a lot.

The record indicates that the uniformed services were not as anxious to go ahead with the project as some of their civilian bosses. Ultimately, the decision to proceed was made by the civilian-dominated Forty Committee.

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The original cover story, based on existing interest in recovering manganese nodules from the ocean floor was ingenious. It also was a lie. When Glomar Explorer first went out for sea trials, the Russians followed and watched it closely. Apparently they bought the cover.

Was the importance of the project sufficient to justify lying to the American public when the issue first arose? Spokesmen for the Hughes interests were instructed to "tell no provable lie." That's another way of saying don't get caught lying.

Having spent nearly two decades as a newsman, and only two years in government, I have an especially hard time swallowing a totally false cover story, even when the misinformation hurts no one. Rather, I would have preferred a partial truth, saying perhaps that Glomar Explorer was designed with the capability to scoop manganese nodules and other valuable objects from the ocean floor. Then, if the principal purpose of the project began to leak, I would have preferred saying, honestly, that no country talks about its intelligence operations, real or rumored. Period. If people want to speculate, fine.

Ironically, one of the most closely guarded secrets in the Federal government began to ooze out, in a garbled but still troubling fashion, apparently because too many details were shared too widely by Federal agents working with local law-enforcement officials to prevent its coming out. That appears to be how the Los Angeles Times tumbled to the first version of the story.

Once CIA Director Colby got into the act, he apparently felt that because of the credibility failure that engulfed senior officials in the wake of Watergate and Vietnam, he could not ask publishers and editors to withhold a story merely on good faith.

So he briefed them at length. First the officials of two major papers. Then a third. Then television networks, news magazines, Sunday supplements. Whenever word trickled over to his Langley, Va., headquarters that another reporter was nosing around, Colby would rush to the reporter's boss, with fascinating details, and a plea not to breathe a word. It got to the point where so many people knew snatches of the story that it was making the rounds of cocktail parties in Washington.

Colby misjudged the nature of people in the news business. They are as patriotic as the next man, but a really good story makes their reportorial juices flow, hungering for more meaty information. And reporters, if they agree for the time being not to print a story, often do not take that forbearance to preclude a little private gossip with colleagues. As a class, reporters are among the most gossipy individuals around. That's one of the things that attracts them to their line of work. Especially in Washington, they measure their relative standing by how well informed they are; and secrets are great for one-upmanship.

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Even after the story broke, the mission was not immediately shelved. At the urging of Kissinger and Schlesinger, and over the objections of Colby and top Pentagon brass, the Forty Committee decided to proceed with midsummer tests at sea of modified equipment in order to keep open the option of making another go at the rest of the Russian sub.

Those who objected

point out that the attempt could not be made secretly. The Russians had posted an intelligence vessel at the site full time. The military did not want to face the embarrassment of going out and either publicly having to back down, or facing a loss of life if the Russians, for example, dropped depth charges during the recovery effort to keep their property out of our hands.

Glomar Explorer was sent out for tests and the improved gear worked excellently. But, finally, this past January, a decision was made to scrub the mission, and subsequently to mothball the ship.

The ultimate question is whether the United States should or can run successful covert intelligence missions? I would say yes on both counts.

To the extent we can learn, for example, intimate details of key Soviet strategic systems, we can improve our own capabilities and hopefully strengthen the deterrence of war.

There is no question in my mind that the secrets being culled from the Soviet MIG-25 Foxbat jet fighter and the pilot who flew it to political exile in Japan will do much to improve America's strategic bomber equipment and tactics. If the pilot had been enticed to defect — and that is categorically denied by the intelligence community — that would have been a legitimate covert operation.

Obviously such a hypothetical mission would have been difficult if not impossible to pull off if word of it had leaked prematurely. Indeed, the lives of those directly involved could have been jeopardized.

Do reporters have the duty to ferret out every secret they can and spread it over page one? It seems to me their duty is to learn what they can and then exercise responsible judgment on how much to write — to adequately inform the public — and when to write so as not to damage legitimate national security or jeopardize.

Sometimes reporters, like anyone else, make bad judgments. But usually, when national security is involved, they tend to err on the side of responsible caution. The few bad calls are the price for an open society. ■

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